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Cornell to launch new Master of Public Health program

By *Krishna Ramanujan*

Outbreaks of Zika and Ebola, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, foodborne diseases and chronic illnesses are constantly in the news, making comprehensive public health assessment, planning and action crucial to the future of the planet.

Starting in the fall 2017 semester, Cornell University will offer a [Master of Public Health \(MPH\) degree](#) with a focus on epidemiology, infectious disease, food systems and sustainability.

The goal will be to train students to handle these complex public health problems.

The MPH program, housed in the Graduate School and administered through the College of Veterinary Medicine, will follow a “[One Health](#)” philosophy that recognizes the interconnectedness of human, animal and environmental health.

The program will take advantage of the university’s expertise across 10 colleges and schools, 20 departments and more than 70 faculty members whose research explores human and animal medicine, climate change, biodiversity, soil, water and air quality, agriculture, human nutrition, diagnostic sciences and epidemiology, biomedical sciences, urban planning and strategic leadership, as well as health care policy, and delivery and management systems.

The MPH program will start with 20 students but is expected increase to 40 over the next four years.

“Our program is unique, and Cornell is extremely well-positioned to do this, because we have people working across all these different disciplines on aspects of health, and the MPH program ties them together,” said Alex Travis, director of the MPH program, associate professor of reproductive biology at the Baker Institute for Animal Health and faculty director for the environment at the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future. “Our goal is to develop public health leaders who use a systems-based approach to tackle the most pressing public health issues of our time.”

The study of Ebola or the Zika virus, Travis said, offers examples of the interplay among humans, animals and the environment. The spread of Ebola resulted from degraded forests that put humans in closer contact with bats and monkeys that harbored the disease. Globalization



Provided

The Food Systems for Health concentration within the new Master of Public Health program will focus on issues like food insecurity and nutrition. Here, a village poultry group in Zambia meets for training and to exchange ideas and resources, as they raise poultry as a reliable source of protein for their families.

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has also spawned complex interactions that require a holistic, systems-based public health approach, as global trade and travel have facilitated the spread of insects and the diseases they carry. Addressing these and other crises requires the coordinated interaction of practitioners from multiple disciplines and health care professions that the One Health approach provides.

Barbara Knuth, senior vice provost and dean of the [Graduate School](#), said, “The new degree program demonstrates how innovative approaches to graduate education can create a student experience that is distinct to Cornell.”

The two-year degree, with accelerated and part-time options for some, will have two initial concentration areas – infectious disease epidemiology and food systems for health. Other focus areas are expected in the future.

The infectious disease epidemiology concentration will train students to tackle emerging viral, bacterial and parasitic outbreaks of human, animal and insect-borne diseases. Graduates will be prepared to measure and track disease spread, map and deliver public health communications, and lead coordinated routine and emergency responses to public health needs.

The food systems for health concentration will prepare students to take a systems-based perspective to assess and coordinate policy, programs and interventions that ensure safe and sustainable land use, food production and processing, food delivery, food safety, food-related outbreak investigations, and patterns of human consumption and nutrition.

The 50-credit degree will include: eight core courses (24 credits) that meet requirements of the degree’s accrediting body; seven concentration area courses (15 credits or more) that utilize diverse Cornell expertise; two mentored practicums (one for three weeks, another for eight weeks) in the public health field where students contribute to assessing or addressing a public health need (seven credits); and a final paper and presentation that show competency in what they learn (four credits).

Current graduate students, students with graduate or professional degrees, and candidates with applicable work experience can apply for a 42-credit accelerated program.

“When you look across Cornell’s campus and the research that is being done, and pair that with the existing and emerging public health needs of communities here and around the world, it makes for such a great match,” said Gen Meredith, associate director of the MPH program and of International Programs in the College of Veterinary Medicine. “When you

MPH program seeks diverse student body

Alex Travis, director of the new Master of Public Health program, is hoping for a “very diverse class” as he anticipates the ideal student body ahead of the fall 2017 launch.

The program’s administrators plan to recruit students from a broad range of backgrounds: graduates from bachelor’s programs who have public health work experience or demonstrate leadership; graduate, veterinary and medical students seeking joint degrees; individuals who have completed relevant graduate or professional degrees; and professionals with three or more years of work experience.

“MPH students are like MBA students in that many of them have been out in the workforce and realize they will be able to do more with further specialized training,” Travis said.

Of those seeking a joint degree, there has been interest from graduate students in entomology, as well as veterinary students and medical students at Weill Cornell Medicine. The MPH degree fits well with many other disciplines including communication, nutrition and food science, to name a few.

Geographically speaking, the program seeks to attract local and New York state applicants as well as international students.

The Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health estimates that a quarter-million more public health workers will be needed by 2020, so the new program couldn’t come at a better time, Travis said.

“There is a tremendous need for more public health practitioners. We are excited

complement that with the university's focus on public service, student and community engagement and globalization, both in having an impact on the world and in bringing the world here, I can't think of a better place to help students grow into being public health leaders of the future."

about the innovative approach that Cornell's MPH is taking and eager to see how graduates of the program will shape the future of public health," he said.

Program partners include such cross-campus initiatives as the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future, the Internationalization Council and Global Cornell, and Engaged Cornell.

Interested candidates should apply through Cornell's Graduate School [application portal, which will open in August 2016](#). For admissions or general program questions, contact Cecelia Madsen, MPH One Health fellow, at cgm76@cornell.edu. For more detailed inquiries, contact Travis, at ajt32@cornell.edu, or Meredith, at gmeredith@cornell.edu.